

News Release

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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Releases Proposed Rule on Double-Crested Cormorant Management

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today published a proposed rule that, if approved, will guide its national management strategy for double-crested cormorants. The rule, which would implement the preferred alternative identified in a draft Environmental Impact Statement on Double-Crested Cormorant Management released in 2001, gives 24 State fish and wildlife agencies, Tribes, and the Agriculture Department greater flexibility to manage double-crested cormorants to reduce conflicts with human activities such as recreational fishing and commercial aquaculture. Double-crested cormorants are colonial waterbirds whose numbers have increased substantially in the past 30 years.

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“The new rule will give local authorities a more active role in double-crested cormorant management,” said Steve Williams, director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “Since this bird’s population is increasing and they have been shown to cause local impacts to natural and economic resources, we believe local management with national oversight is the best approach to reduce conflicts.”

The Service’s proposed rule, if approved, would establish a new public resource depredation order authorizing 24 State fish and wildlife agencies, Tribes, and Agriculture’s Wildlife Services agency to implement a double-crested cormorant management program, while maintaining Federal oversight of populations via reporting and monitoring requirements to ensure sustainable populations. Without this rule, agencies must first receive a Federal permit in order to control double-crested cormorants.

Under the proposed rule, a previous 1998 aquaculture depredation order would remain in effect and continue to allow double-crested cormorants to be taken at commercial freshwater aquaculture facilities and State-owned fish hatcheries in 13 States (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas) and would be expanded to authorize winter roost control by Wildlife Services in those States.

By the time cormorants were given Federal protection in the early 1970s, their populations had dropped precipitously, largely due to DDT-induced egg shell thinning and human persecution. Today, the population is at historic highs, due in large part to the presence of ample food in their summer and winter ranges, federal and state protection, and reduced contaminant levels.

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Between 1970 and 1991, in the Great Lakes region of the United States and Canada the number of double-crested cormorant nests increased from 89 to 38,000. By 1997, the Great Lakes population had reached approximately 93,000 pairs and was most recently estimated at 115,000 pairs. The total North American population of double-crested cormorants is approximately 2 million birds.

The population resurgence of double-crested cormorants has led to increasing concern about their impact on resources such as fisheries, aquaculture, vegetation, and colonial waterbirds. The evidence shows that impacts to these resources are local, but often significant. Studies also show that cormorants have different effects on recreational fisheries in different areas since biological and environmental factors differ widely from site to site.

Following publication of the draft EIS in the fall of 2001, the Service hosted ten separate meetings at sites across the country to share the findings of the draft EIS and to seek public comment on the public resource depredation order alternative. Based on more than 1,000 comment letters, the strongest public support was for this alternative, followed by the alternative of regional population reduction. The proposed rule will have a 60-day public comment period.

Requests for copies of the proposed rule should be mailed to Chief, Division of Migratory Bird Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Room 634, Arlington, Virginia 22203. Copies of the DEIS can also be downloaded from the Division of Migratory Bird Management web site at: <http://migratorybirds.fws.gov/issues/cormorant/cormorant.html>. For further information, call the division at 703/358-1714 or mail to Chief, Division of Migratory Bird Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, mail Stop MBSP-4107, Arlington, Virginia 22203.

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Double-crested cormorants are one of approximately 800 species protected under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, and subsequent amendments. This act was first passed to implement the terms of the convention between the U.S. and Great Britain (on behalf of Canada) for the protection of migratory birds. Excessive market hunting of migratory birds prompted this convention, which was later followed by conventions with Mexico, Japan, and Russia. Cormorants were first protected through an amendment to the Mexican convention in 1972. Because cormorants are not a part of the U.S. and Great Britain convention, they are not protected by the federal Canadian government, and receive protection there only at the provincial level.

The Service has funded population surveys, in coordination with states and the Canadian Wildlife Service, to monitor the species throughout the Great Lakes basin. The Service has also funded and conducted food habit studies in order to determine the diet of cormorants at different locations in the Great Lakes, as well as a range-wide status assessment of the Great Lakes cormorant population in order to gather the biological information needed to help develop a management plan.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to State fish and wildlife agencies.

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